

U.S. ELECTION SEEN AFFECTING MOSCOW

Surge by Hart Among Several Factors Cited in Continued Cool Washington Ties

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Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, March 23 — Despite efforts by the Reagan Administration to break the impasse in Soviet-American relations, Western diplomats and visitors who have talked with senior Soviet officials believe that a number of factors, including uncertainty over the Presidential election, are likely to persuade the Kremlin to remain cool toward Washington's overtures for some time to come.

In particular, the diplomats say, the United States is likely to find the Soviet leadership reluctant to resume the negotiations on nuclear weapons that have been in abeyance since late last year unless Washington offers a prior concession of the kind the Kremlin has been demanding on the issues that have led to deadlocks on two sets of weapons talks.

Six weeks ago, after Konstantin U. Chernenko became the Soviet leader on the death of Yuri V. Andropov, there were hopes that Mr. Chernenko would break the impasse.

President Reagan's speech on Jan. 16 seeking a renewed dialogue between the two countries marked at least a modest shift on American policy. Mr. Chernenko greeted Vice President Bush and other Western dignitaries after the funeral of Mr. Andropov in a positive manner that was taken by some Western envoys as a harbinger of new diplomatic moves.

Hart Seen as a Factor

Recently, those hopes have dimmed. Since early this month there has been a shift back to the chilly and implacable mood that set in after the Russians walked out of the medium-range missile talks in Geneva in November, and followed that up by suspending parallel negotiations on strategic, or long-range, weapons.

The Kremlin has rebuffed diplomatic probes from Washington, and has driven the message home by adopting a stringent and uncooperative attitude on a range of lesser issues.

One element that seems to be deterring the Kremlin is the emergence of Senator Gary Hart as a serious contender for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Soviet officials and commentators who were talking a few weeks ago as though they regarded President Reagan as odds-on to be re-elected are suddenly saying that the election could hinge on the state of Soviet-American relations, and that the Democrats could still win.

Diplomats say they sense that this has had a major impact on policy toward the United States. As long as Mr. Reagan was regarded as likely to overwhelm his Democratic opponent, the diplomats say, there was a chance that the Soviet leaders might seek arms agreements with him before the election.

Now many diplomats believe that Mr. Hart's successes in the primaries and the emphasis he has placed on a nuclear weapons freeze is impelling the Russians in the other direction, away from any early concessions.

This stance may have attractions for the Kremlin regardless of whether Mr. Hart emerges as the Democratic nominee. As the diplomats view it, the Russians see the Colorado Senator as pushing the nuclear weapons issue into the forefront of the campaign, thus increasing the pressure on Mr. Reagan to modify his position. At the same time, by enlivening the Democratic contest, the diplomats say, Mr. Hart is seen as increasing the chances that either he or former Vice President Walter F. Mondale will give Mr. Reagan a good contest in November.

In the meantime, it is plain that the Kremlin sees a resumption of negotiations with the Reagan Administration as a political prize that would help the President's election chances.

What this implies is that an arms

concession of sufficient importance by Mr. Reagan would outweigh other considerations and could prompt the re-opening of talks.

And there were new indications today that the Kremlin's price for a nuclear agreement would remain high.

Two articles by the official press agency, Tass, said that there could be no return to the negotiations on medium-range missiles without prior withdrawal of the Pershing 2 and cruise missiles that the United States began deploying in Britain and West Germany at the end of last year.

One of the Tass articles rebutted for the first time a compromise proposal promoted in some quarters in the West under which talks would resume on a Western pledge to freeze further deployment.

One Tass piece also discussed an interview given to a West German newspaper, Offenburger Tagblatt, by the West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl.

Tass said Mr. Kohl had predicted that Moscow would return to the Geneva talks. But the Tass article said: "The Soviet Union will not take part in such a game, and will not have such talks and discussions. The Soviet stand on that issue is most explicit and clear cut. The way to the talks can open only through withdrawal of the American missiles."